

Extended Childhood: The New American Way

Resilience. It's one of the latest buzzwords in society, especially when it comes to raising children, [explains](#) Richard Godwin in *The Guardian*.

But teaching resilience is a bit challenging these days, Godwin implies, especially when kids are raised in the traditional education system which “encourages children to see their worth in terms of grades achieved, hoops jumped and boxes ticked.” Such a system keeps young people dependent, safe, and micromanaged – a form of perpetual childhood.

Godwin speaks concerning the U.K. education system, but many say the same of education in the U.S.

However, this was not always the case. There was a time when U.S. education and child-rearing was completely different from that in European countries, a fact which likely helped the U.S. become a leader in entrepreneurship and success.

Such is the argument made in [a lecture](#) by celebrated author and teacher John Taylor Gatto. He suggests that today's schools handicap children by keeping them in perpetual childhood. “Extending childhood was not originally the American way, just the reverse,” Gatto declares.

The original way, according to Gatto, was laid out by Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1835 book [Democracy in America](#). Tocqueville put his finger on the difference between American and European young people by noting that the former had “no adolescence.” The responsibility given to children in the U.S. at a young age gave them a great advantage over their European counterparts, who were constrained by age, race, and gender consciousness.

According to Gatto, Tocqueville's observation was echoed several decades later by author Edward Eggleston. He noted that European children held on to their childhood for many years, while American children left it behind at age seven. This was due to the type of work each would be doing. American children would go on to be self-employed, independent earners. European children, however, would not:

In Europe ordinary children weren't allowed decision-making responsibilities because the economies of Europe could not tolerate the kind of mind and character which emerges from early mental independence. Individuals there had to be proletarianized into masses for the benefit of factories, factory farms, standing armies, and social class ability.

Unfortunately, as Gatto notes, the constrained, dependent attitude once instilled in European children has become the norm in modern day America. No longer do we have independent thinkers who grow up quickly and support themselves. Instead, today's children are sucked into the vortex of "modern management," which argues that: "Most people cannot be trusted with responsibility because they are childish and incompetent. They have to be closely watched and managed."

Which brings us back to resilience. We all want our children to have this quality, but are we making it difficult for them to obtain? Do we, as parents and educators, need to back off at an earlier age, give our children opportunities to be responsible, and encourage them to think outside society's conventional box? Or would we rather go the comfortable route and allow our children to simply blend in with the rest of modern society which must be "closely watched and managed"?

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